

Memory and Israeli Identity

MOSHE ZIMMERMANN

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Two constitutive memories play a decisive role in shaping Israeli collective identity, two memories as contradictory as possible that complement each other - the memory of the Holocaust on the one hand and that of the creation of the state on the other hand. The official Hebrew language uses for these two conflicting memories the terms *Sboa* and *Tekuma* i.e.: *Holocaust* and *resurrection*. The pre-history of the Jewish state is thus perceived as a chronology leading from the state of absolute catastrophe, the Holocaust, to the state of redemption and resurrection as expressed in the heroic war of independence. Thus the two contradictory experiences come to support and justify the character of the collective Israeli identity as presented and developed by the various agents of socialization of the state and of the Zionist establishment since their inception. The two above-mentioned terms came to be so important because they have become the pivot around which Zionist ideology, identity and action revolve.

Since we are dealing here with concepts and icons of collective memory we must pay special attention to the role history as a discipline and as a popular source of political legitimation plays in the process. History, especially within the educational and public sphere, is always there to be instrumentalized for the purposes and aims set by the political system or by society. The difference between political systems - democratic and non-democratic - is in this respect a difference in method not in principle. For the Israeli society and body-politic history exercises an enormous influence and the stress on the two above-mentioned concepts, those two memories, is the natural outcome of the high value attributed to history and historical arguments in the inner-Israeli discourse.

While talking about Israeli society in this context one must be aware of the fact that it is the Jewish component of Israeli society, about 80% of the population, that we have in mind. The other 20% of the Israelis, the Arab citizens of the state, represent a totally different approach to those two memories. The memory of the Holocaust on the one hand concerns the Arabs mainly as a Jewish, Zionist instrument of historical legitimation, not as a part of their own experience, and the memory of *Tekuma* means for them automatically the memory of Arab defeat and catastrophe (called *Nakba* in Arabic) 1948. Thus these two pillars of collective memory help constitute very different collective identities within the formal framework of Israeli citizenship. These contradicting collective memories illustrate better than anything else the problem of bi-nationalism in Israel.

Having said that, we may concentrate from now on the effect of *Sboa* and *Tekuma* on the collective Jewish identity in Israel, which differs not only from Arab-Israeli identity but from Jewish identity in the diaspora as well.

The existence of a Israeli-Jewish identity is not self-evident or natural - in many respects it means reversing history and inventing a national Jewish identity. The question of collective identity is to a great extent the question of interpretation of the Jewish past, selecting and reconstructing past information as to fit the idea of national self-determination of the Jewish collectivity in Palestine. Reconstructing an ambivalent history, a *Janus* face, of which catastrophe is on the one side and military victory on the other one is the outcome of the challenge the need for historical legitimation poses to Zionism or to Jewish nationalism as it emerges in its new territory.

The short span between 1945, in which the *final solution* seemed closest to its realization, and 1948, the year of the creation of the state of Israel, enabled the mold of historical legitimation to demonstrate the direct causal relation between catastrophe and salvation as well as the fact that it is for the Jews themselves to chose between the alternatives, or better, between the road leading to catastrophe and the one leading to resurrection. The intended historical lesson for the Israelis is that they made the choice, the right choice of course. Yet, even though the chronological pivot around which the *Sboa* and *Tekuma* sequence revolves is to be found within those three years, the general attention is payed to the long *roots* and ongoing effect of each of the phenomena: on the one hand the alleged eternal history of Antisemitism and persecution and on the other hand the myth of Jewish heroism and of the

MEMORY AND ISRAELI IDENTITY

pioneering spirit leading up to the creation of the Jewish state and guarantying its existence.

The collective memory of both sides of *Janus'* face is created and underlined through various social and political agents: school curricula, extra-curricular educational programs, days of commemoration, monuments and media events. Both, *Shoa* and *Tekuma*, are extremely well documented and dealt with by all these agents.

Antisemitism, that is the modern term used to describe Jew-hatred through the Ages - serves in Zionist historical interpretation as the *original sin* that lead up to the awakening of Jewish national consciousness and to the foundation of the Zionist movement. The memory of the Holocaust thus presents itself as a culmination of a continuous, uninterrupted chain of antisemitic occurrences conditioned both by the anti-Jewish character of non-Jews and by the dispersion of the Jewish nation among the non Jews in the diaspora. The memory of Jew-hatred was very prominent within the framework of Judaism as a religion since biblical times: The story of Pharaoh and the events that caused the Jewish exodus out of Egypt is maybe the earliest example. The story told in the biblical book of Esther, about yet another plan to exterminate the Jews, this time in the Persian empire, is perhaps the most effective myth of persecution in the collective Jewish memory through the ages. The fact that these myths in themselves could be instrumentalized by non-Jews in order to be directed against them (blood libel etc.) and thus serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy is intriguing in itself, but should not divert us from our main concern which is the creation of the collective memory from within. What makes the later stories about Jew-hatred and discrimination different is that they were stories of catastrophes that could not be diverted: The massacres during the first crusade, the black plague 1348, the Chmelnitzky Pogroms 1648 etc. The impression created first by the historical approach of the men of the enlightenment and even more so by the Zionists was that of a history which is essentially a chain of catastrophes. The Zionists used some modern instances of persecution as direct constitutive element of their program of collective memory, starting with the Russian Pogroms of 1881 and the Dreifuss affair in France 1894, followed by the Kishinev pogrom 1903, the Petlura atrocities 1920 and culminating in the Holocaust.

Modern historians, the so called *new historians* of Israel, who made an attempt during the 1990s to relativize this non-ending story of persecution, either by shifting their readers' attention to less larmoyant aspects of Jewish history or by comparing the fate of the Jews to the fate of other discriminated groups came under heavy attack just because they were questioning the pattern of memory so central for Zionist, Israeli identity. One example deals with medieval history: Wasn't there in the Jewish attitude towards their neighbours or in their attitude to the sanctity of life at least a grain of explanation to the reactions on the part of the non-Jews? When the historian Israel Yuval started this debate he came under a heavy barrage from his peers, fighting to defend the myth of the eternal victim. The other example concerns the 20th century: When a historian tried to introduce the Armenian tragedy during World War I under the title 'the Armenian Holocaust' into the school books he came under attack from those claiming that a holocaust is a singular phenomenon that was practiced against Jews only.

These examples (and others) illustrate the deep-rooted belief in the continuity, eternity and singularity of the discrimination and the persecution of Jews. The memory of the Holocaust during World War II serves as a summary and confirmation of the underlying laws of history as understood and transmitted by the many agents of memory. This very central phenomenon of the Holocaust thus became an 'untouchable' topic, causing excitement and bad blood each time the mention of it or a comparison could be used against political or other opponents. Any comparison f.i., between the Holocaust and the outcome of the Arab-Israeli conflict is cause for vehement verbal attacks or libel suits before even trying to follow the comparison and trying systematically to counter it.

On the other hand there is the long memory of heroism and the fighting spirit of the Jews. But unlike the memory of persecution, which is central to traditional, pre-Zionist Israelis too, the heroic element is essential only for the Jewish identity and collective memory of the Zionists. Nationalism tends to stress the fight for national liberation or national unity in most of the cases, and Jewish nationalism, especially against the background of continuous persecution is no exception. This urge to look for military heroism was so

strong within Jewish nationalism, that it was found and highlighted even in the Holocaust: The institution created to commemorate the slaughtered Jews and the day of commemoration were called resp. 'The institute of' and 'The day of Holocaust and bravery'. The bravery alluded to was the attempt made sporadically during World War II to fight against the Nazis with arms, as in the case of the Warsaw ghetto 1943. Here catastrophe and resurrection are not only contemporary, they demonstrate allegedly the right choice - between the readiness to fight (even at the price of death) and the passive acceptance of persecution and catastrophe. Survivors and historians were critical of this interpretation but until recently were unable to change the pattern of memory as to redefine the alternatives and the concept of bravery or catastrophe. Moreover: The combination 'catastrophe-heroism' or 'Holocaust-Israel' proved to be more and more successful as the time passed. After the fall of the iron curtain the memory of this combination was further institutionalized in form of school excursions to Poland, to the Nazi extermination camps which aimed at producing a perfect Israeli identity by contrasting the Israeli flag and the sites of slaughter. Here too, criticism was ineffective.

The chapter of the Holocaust is, no doubt, the most problematic one when it comes to the memory of bravery and heroism. Yet the combination of catastrophe and heroism is more of the rule than the exception: The story of the fall of the Second Temple and the fall of Gamla or Massada which ensued have a similar pattern: The heroic story does not have a happy end, its only value is the demonstration of heroism, not a positive result.

The reconstruction of Jewish heroism of the past disclose some additional problems. Since it was essential for Jewish nationalism to show that heroism was always connected with the nation and its interests a reinterpretation of religious values as national ones was the unavoidable outcome. For example the story of the Matchable was thus successfully reconstructed as to fit into the pattern of heroic Jewish nationalism. The notion of freedom as a central idea of Passover was nationalized too. So have nearly all the Holidays in the Jewish calendar been reshaped and the elements of struggle, heroism and nationalism stressed. The alternative of submissiveness and catastrophe on the one hand, heroism and struggle on the other has become pivotal to the process of collective memory.

Moreover: the Middle Ages were considered by modern Jewish nationalism, and even before by the Jewish reform movement, as representing

an erroneous course of development. It came to represent the era of catastrophe as against the era of the second temple, the era of ancient nationalism characterized by Jewish heroism. This is why the Israeli historic memory of heroism has concentrated primarily on ancient history. Not only Moses, Joshua or Juda Maccabeus, but also Bar Kochba, the leader of an anti-Roman uprising in 132 AD, retrospectively became symbols of national resurrection and protagonists of the armed national struggle. The new Israelis, who grew up into these patterns of memory and identity, used these myth as a guideline and as examples for an adequate behaviour and as prototypes for the modern heroic stories that accompany the history of Jewish nationalism in the 20th century.

Since historiography is an ongoing process, a clash between new findings and old cliches is from time to time the natural outcome. Yet, if what logically follows from historical research is giving up those cliches, the unwilling of the agents of their dissemination to collaborate is not unexpected either. In our case, when memories of heroism and catastrophe in Jewish history are relativized by research, a crisis of values and identity in the Israeli society becomes unavoidable. This is why the agents of the traditional memories put up such a fight against the potential agents of the new memory.

RESUMO: A experiência do holocausto, no período nazista da Alemanha, constitui um elemento decisivo da memória social judia e da identidade israelense. A reflexão histórica evidencia que a constante hipervalorização do heroísmo ao longo de um passado de perseguição e de resistência (recente) precisa ser re-analisada. O papel da memória é fundamental, mas a diversificação da experiência política (em particular com os novos grupos de imigrados) requer a construção de uma nova memória israelense própria.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Judaísmo, holocausto, Israel, memória, identidade.